

IX

GAUL

Caesar 'also fought fifty pitched battles, the only commander to surpass Marcus Marcellus, who fought thirty-nine.' – *Pliny the Elder, mid first century AD.*¹

'Caesar possessed the highest skill and elegance of style, but also the most perfect knack of explaining his plans.' – *Aulus Hirtius, 44 BC*²

Caesar was forty-one when he set out from Rome for his province. He would not return to the city for nine years. The remainder of his life was dominated by warfare to a degree that it is difficult to exaggerate. From this moment on, there were only two years in which he was not involved in major military operations. In 50 BC this was because Gaul was conquered and he was busily engaged in settling the region. In 44 BC he was murdered just days before setting out for grand new campaigns against first Dacia and then Parthia. In most years he fought at least one, and often several, major battles or sieges. Pliny claimed that altogether Caesar led his army in fifty battles, while Appian says that thirty of these engagements occurred during the campaigns in Gaul. It is impossible to confirm or deny the precision of these numbers, since in any period of history there is rarely agreement as to just what constitutes a battle and what is merely an engagement or skirmish. The fact remains that these authors reflected the widespread belief that Caesar had fought more often and with more consistent success than any other Roman general. Alexander, with whom he was frequently compared, took part in only five pitched battles and three major sieges, although he was in many smaller encounters. Hannibal, who was up against a very different opponent, fought more big battles, but probably did not surpass, or perhaps even equal, Caesar's total of major engagements. It was not until the era of Napoleon, with the increased intensity of warfare, that a few army leaders began to see more days of serious combat than Caesar and the other great commanders of the ancient world.³

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The contrast between Caesar's life before and after 58 BC could not be more marked. Up until then, he had spent at the very most some nine years outside Italy, and perhaps half that time in some sort of military service. This was fairly typical for a Roman senator, if anything perhaps slightly below the average, although not in comparison with men like Cicero who relied on constant appearances in the courts to keep themselves in the public eye. Once again, it is worth emphasising that for all his flamboyance, association with dubious characters and the controversial nature of some of his actions during the consulship, the overall pattern of Caesar's career had been broadly conventional. Having reached the consulship two years before the normal age, he was just marginally younger than the average proconsul. Compared to Alexander the Great, Hannibal or Pompey his opportunity came very late in life. Alexander was dead by the age of thirty-three, and Hannibal fought his last battle at forty-five. Napoleon and Wellington were just a year older than Hannibal when they clashed at Waterloo, though Blücher was seventy-three. In contrast Robert E. Lee was in his fifties when the American Civil War broke out, as was Patton when America entered the Second World War. Neither by Roman nor modern standards could Caesar have been considered elderly in 58 BC, but neither would it have been obvious to any of his contemporaries that he was about to prove himself as one of the greatest commanders of all time. In the past he had shown talent, courage, and self-confidence during his spells of military service, but plenty of other ambitious men had displayed similar ability. As always in Caesar's story, we need to be very careful not to allow hindsight to impose a sense of inevitability on events. The scale of Caesar's successes in Gaul was startling, even in a Rome so recently dazzled by Pompey's achievements. Yet the balance between success and failure was often narrow, and he might easily have been killed, or have died from accident or disease before he could return. That he would eventually come back as a rebel to fight against his former ally and son-in-law Pompey was unlikely to have occurred to anyone. When Caesar went to Gaul he had plans and ambitions, and doubtless considered many possible outcomes, but in the end he was trusting to fortune for his future.

THE WAR COMMENTARIES

Caesar had worked hard to win the opportunity for such a great command, running up huge debts, taking great political risks and making many enemies. He needed colossal victories if all this was to become worthwhile, but he also

had to make sure that people knew about his achievements if he was to gain real advantage from them. Pompey's campaigns against the pirates and Mithridates had been recorded by Theophanes of Mytilene, a Greek scholar who had accompanied his staff. Caesar had no need of the literary services of other men and would record his victories in his own words. He had already published a number of his speeches as well as several now lost works, some of which he had written as a youth. The Emperor Augustus later suppressed these immature works, including a tragedy entitled *Oedipus*, and also his *Praises of Hercules* and *A Collection of Maxims*, and none of the speeches have survived other than in fragments. There was a tradition for Roman generals to celebrate their achievements by writing commentaries – a genre that was seen as distinct from history, and was often viewed as the material for subsequent historians to use. Caesar eventually produced ten books of *War Commentaries*, with seven covering the operations in Gaul from 58–52 BC, and three more dealing with the Civil War against Pompey from 49–48 BC. After his death, several of his own officers added four more books covering the operations in Gaul in 51 BC, the campaigns in Egypt and the East in 48–47 BC, Africa in 46 BC, and Spain in 45 BC. No other commentaries have survived in anything other than the tiniest fragments, making it difficult to know whether or not Caesar's books conformed to the established style.⁴

Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War* was from the beginning acknowledged as one of the greatest works of Latin literature. Cicero had great respect for Caesar's oratory and was similarly generous in his praise of the *Commentaries*:

They are admirable indeed . . . like naked forms, upright and beautiful, pared of all ornamentation as if they had removed a robe. Yet while he wished to provide other authors with the means for writing history, he may only have succeeded in pleasing the incompetent, who might like to apply their 'gifts' to his material, for he has deterred all sane men from writing; for there is nothing better in the writing of history than clear and distinguished brevity.⁵

These words were written in 46 BC, when Cicero was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with Caesar's dictatorship, so it may be that there was just a hint of double meaning when he said that 'men of sound judgement' had been put off from writing their own narratives of his achievements. Nevertheless, it is clear that his praise for the literary quality

of the books was entirely genuine, perhaps especially because the stark simplicity of their narrative contrasted so much with his own style of rhetoric. On one occasion Caesar declared that an orator should 'avoid an unusual word as the helmsman of a ship avoided a reef'. Apart from necessary technical or foreign terms, he adhered staunchly to this principle and produced a narrative that was clear and fast-paced. Rarely, if ever, is it emotional or melodramatic, for he allowed the drama and importance of the events to speak for themselves. Referring to himself always in the third person, while his soldiers are *nostri* or 'our men', he tells the story of the army of the Roman people under their properly appointed commander, as they struggle against ferocious enemies and even nature itself. At every stage Caesar presents his actions as entirely in the interest of the Republic. Although the modern reader may sometimes balk at the catalogue of unabashed imperialism, massacre, mass execution and enslavement contained in the *Commentaries*, a contemporary Roman would not have found these things shocking. Indeed, it must have been hard, even for one of Caesar's political opponents, not to get carried along with the excitement of the narrative.⁶

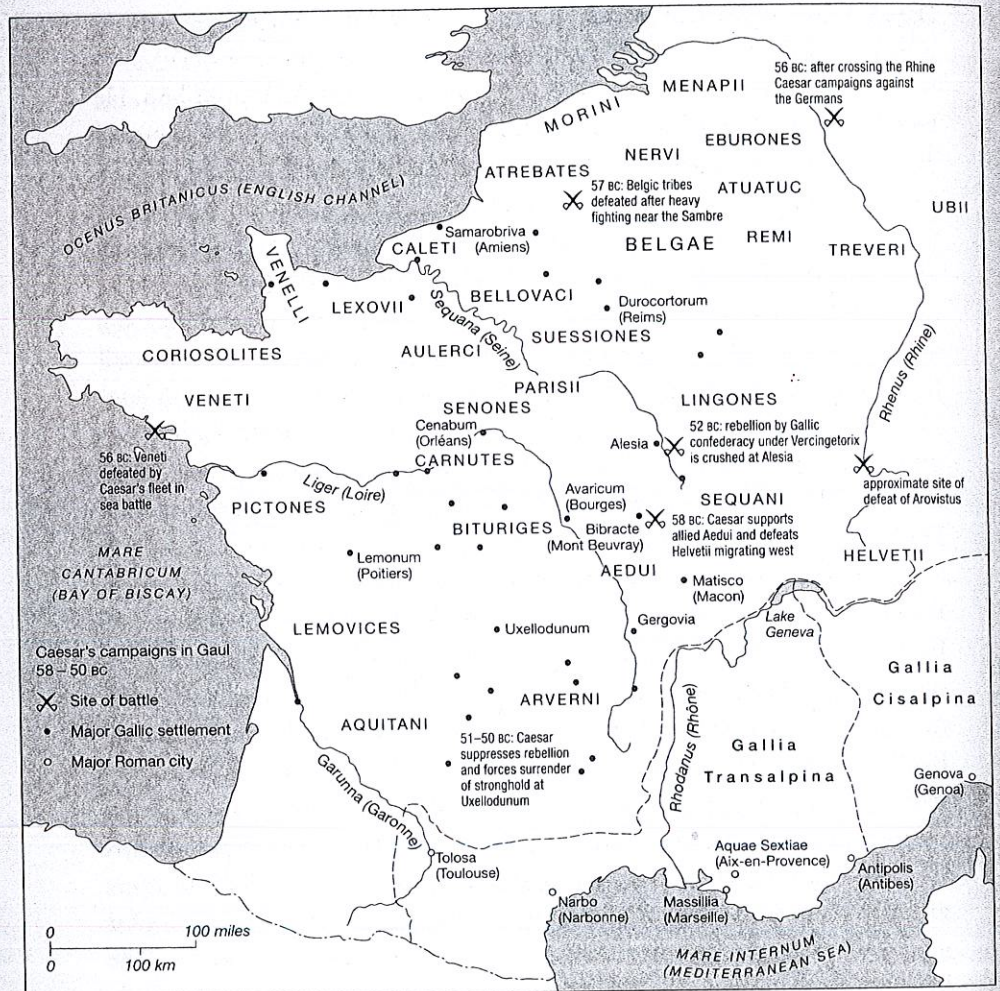
Many political and military leaders have written their own versions of the events in which they were involved, but few have matched the literary standard of Caesar's *Commentaries*. In recent times Churchill probably comes closest, in the sheer power of his words and the speed with which he produced his account so soon after the Second World War. Yet there is one major difference, both from Churchill and the vast majority of other famous generals, for all of them wrote for posterity, knowing that their own careers were substantially over and wishing to imprint their chosen version of events on future opinion. In contrast Caesar was far more concerned with the contemporary audience, and wrote to help further his career and gain even more opportunities for glory (which had also been true of Churchill with his earlier writings). It is not absolutely clear when the seven books of *Commentaries on the Gallic War* were written and released, but it is often asserted that they came out altogether in 51-50 BC. The conjecture - and it is no more than this in spite of the certainty with which it is often asserted - is that in the months of tension that would eventually culminate in the Civil War, Caesar was hoping to win as much support as possible in Rome. Yet this had been true from the moment he left for Gaul in 58 BC, for neither he, nor any other man pursuing a public career, could afford to be forgotten by the electorate and the influential groups in the city. It would have been strange

'THE WHOLE OF GAUL IS DIVIDED'

In 58 BC it was not obvious where Caesar's campaigns would lead him. He had first been granted Cisalpine Gaul and Illyricum as his province, and Transalpine Gaul was only added after the sudden death of its governor. Caesar's original intention may well have been a Balkan campaign, probably to curb the growing power of the Dacian King Burebista, who was carving out a powerful empire around his heartland in what is now Transylvania. The region was wealthy, and scarcely explored by Roman armies, offering the glory attached to defeating a people never before encountered. He may well have been planning to advance in that direction, both in 58 BC and in later years, but events continued to provide him with ready opportunities for military adventures in Gaul, and the Balkan expedition never took place. Even so, it never left Caesar's mind, for he was planning to move against Dacia in 44 BC when he was assassinated.¹⁸

In the first century BC Gaul comprised the area of modern France, Belgium and part of Holland, running from the Rhine to the Atlantic coast. In no sense was Gaul a nation. As Caesar famously said in the opening sentence of the *Commentaries on the Gallic War* its population was divided into three ethnic and linguistic groups. In the south-west, bordering on the Pyrenees, were the Aquitanians, whom he believed had much in common with the Iberians of Spain. In the north, especially the north-east, were the Belgians, while central Gaul was the home of the peoples whom the Romans referred to as Gauls (*Galli*), but who named themselves Celts. Each of these groups was in turn subdivided into numerous individual peoples, who for all their similarity in language and culture were often mutually hostile. The basic political unit was the clan (*pagus*), and several of these usually made up a tribe (*civitas*). (Neither English word is entirely appropriate, and some scholars would prefer state to tribe, but no one has really come up with anything better.) The importance of the tribe seems to have increased markedly in the century before Caesar's arrival in Gaul, and some scholars would like to see them as comparatively recent inventions. More probably, the changing political and economic climate in Gaul had simply given new importance to loose ties of kinship and ritual that were very long established. Even so, the degree of unity between the clans of one tribe varied considerably, and there were a number of cases during the Gallic Wars when individual *pagi* acted independently. Kings appear in some tribes, and perhaps also at the clan level, but not in others and the majority seem to have been governed by councils or senates, with the day-to-day running of affairs

PROCONSUL 58-50 BC



Gaul and its tribes

being placed in the hands of elected magistrates. Rome's oldest ally, the Aedui, had a supreme magistrate called the Vergobret who held office for a single year. No man could be elected twice to this post, nor could any member of his family hold the office during his lifetime, thus preventing any individual or group from monopolising power. The similarity of this ideal to the Roman Republican system is striking, and in many ways the tribes of Gaul resembled the city-states of the Mediterranean world, though perhaps at an earlier stage of development.¹⁹

~~There is an on-going academic debate over the extent to which we can see the Gauls and other peoples who spoke 'Celtic' languages as part of one~~